

Alice Mona Caird's Reputation: The Paradigm of Duality

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Alice Mona Caird's reputation: the paradigm of duality¹

If reputation walks hand in hand with the observed, duality has the observer as a shelter. It means good or bad reputations depend on how the others admire, respect or simply dislike the behaviour, character or social work of the observed. Hence, the acquisition of a positive or a negative recognition among others, depending its rise or fall on a direct or an indirect point of view of an observer towards the observed.

Nobody is an exception to the above rule and Alice Mona Caird (1854-1930), whose work started under the pseudonym of G. Noel Hatton, combined both roles. Thus, when in the role of being observed, she gained supporters and opponents. The former extended her reputation into a level worth of being risen, labelling her as “an advanced/new woman”², while the latter, such as Eliza Lynn Linton (1822-1898), addressed to her as a “wild woman” or a “girl of the period”.

However, when on stage, Caird also performed the role of a particularly active observer and through writing and oral discourse, she ventured herself to express her radical arguments and her discontent and her pessimism principally in relation to the condition of married women. Reluctant to an emphasis on the common meaning of the expression *woman nature*, Caird spread her points of view mainly about women's rights in what concerns women's personal ambition in matters of social-political opportunities. Against submission and any kind of suffering, she reveals herself in opposition to what Linton considers the ideal of “womanhood” when she spoke about the “The Girl of the Period” in the *Saturday Review* (March 14th, 1868):

a creature generous, capable, and modest (...) a girl who could be trusted alone if need be, because of the innate purity and dignity of her nature, but who was neither bold in bearing nor masculine in mind; a girl who, when she married,

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² Ann Heilmann in *New Woman Fiction*, 2002 (2000), considers the difficulty in defining the term because it “constitutes a complex historical phenomenon which operated at both cultural (textual and visual) and socio-political levels (...)”, 2.

would be her husband's friend and companion, but never his rival; one who would consider their interest identical, and not hold him as just so much fair game for spoil; who would make his house his true home and place of rest, not a mere passage-place for vanity and ostentation to go through; a tender mother, an industrious housekeeper, a judicious mistress. (Linton 413).

That allusion to the "sacredness of the home" is, on the contrary, attacked by Caird who vividly condemns Martin Luther (1483-1546) for his defence on the *woman nature*, which is, from his point of view, essentially one of duty and of service. This opinion, which Luther views as a principle, is regarded by Caird as an offence against every wife because, that way, "He/(Luther) lays enormous stress on the command to 'increase and multiply', and obviously regards women simply and solely in relation to their powers of carrying out this exhortation" (Caird 79). Thus, while the reputation of women is quite near of what she thinks a sort of a submitted inferior being, the reputation of men becomes the reverse, once they have authority and right over women and they can attach them to a rule of obedience, only comparable to a dog that was chained "to keep watch over" his master's home (Caird 64).

Mona Caird expressed the above ideas in 1888 and Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904) has anticipated that same idea in 1878 when she referred that "the notion that a man's wife is his PROPERTY, in the sense in which a horse is his property (...), is the fatal root of incalculable evil and misery. Every brutal-minded man, and many a man who in other relations of life is not brutal, entertains more or less vaguely the notion that his wife is his *thing* [...]" (Cobbe in *CIWM* 138).

References to the compulsory captivity of women in a man's household were also not ignored by intellectuals such as John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) who has referred to it in his discourse about the subjection of women. And how about children's classical stories? Do not they join hands on repeating the same idea? It is known, as an example, that Cinderella's reputation was of an *angel in the house* after marriage and that her prince's reputation was of a hero, after having debated himself a lot against powerful dangers in order to bring his future wife to his own home. And Ulysses? Had he not suffered too much against the adversities constantly coming to inhibit his decision of arriving soon to his own land? Physically, he was a brave hero.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), in the twentieth century, and Caird or Cobbe, among others, in the nineteenth century, touched similar protests towards gender discrimination, or, more precisely, towards the meaning that was implicit in the expression *woman nature*. According to Mona Caird, what is referred as "the nature of women" pushes them inside home, does not allow them the privilege of independence, and refuses them social rights. As a consequence, great suffering comes, as she says: "To men, the gods give both sides of the apple of life; a woman is sometimes permitted the choice of the halves, — either, but not both. In thousands of cases she is offered neither" (Caird 171). Those are the circumstances Power Cobbe also refers to and that forbid women "to exercise the rights of citizenship" (Cobbe in *CIWM*, 138).

John Stuart Mill is not too far away from that idea when he assertively says that “What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing — the result of forced repression in some direction, unnatural stimulation in others”. And he goes on explaining the reason why things have come to such a universal standard:

All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections (Mill in *OLW* 138; 132).

Montague Cookson touched this same idea in 1872 in the article “The Morality of Married Life”. There he explains that women can be victims not only of recurrent physical suffering (because of giving birth and rearing their children) but also of their society which “it is true, does not require a wife to be much more than the head-domestic of her establishment, and if her nursery is full it commonly permits her head to be empty”. So, reviewing, in short, his own opinion, Cookson says: “Life for her has only two practical sides, maternity and the management of her household” (Cookson 395; 399).

But because, according to Cobbe, these self-sacrificing English feminine creatures and genuine unselfish girls can be protagonists of domestic violence, they should be heard whenever they are victims of the brutality of their husbands. That was what Cobbe advocated in the article “Wife-Torture in England” (1878) where she tells her readers about the “vexatious condition of women”, mainly about those who live in industrial areas. Instead of being worshipped as *angels in the house*, she reveals that many of them are victims of “that Black Country where the green of earth is replaced by mounds of slag and shale, where no flower grows, no fruit ripens, scarcely a bird sings” (*CIWM*, 135). Because violence against women is a constant there, Cobbe qualifies its masculine (sometimes drunken) authors as “wife-beaters”, the ones who belong to “the club of brute force” (Cobbe in *CIWM* 135; 134).

But how can women give up such treatment if, as Cookson referred, “marriage still exists itself, even to the English Protestant mind, in a quasi-sacramental dress (...) [and] the obstacles to divorce are much more formidable in this country than in most others” (Cookson 397). Alice Mona Caird has referred to this same subject in her interview to the *Women’s Penny Paper*, where she advocated a free contract in order to solve many marital problems. Cookson is quite precise when he summarises the above ideas on saying that “marriage is regarded by every class of the English people as a thing not to be lightly entered on” (397).

Ellen Moers, in *Literary Women*, also admits the difficulty women have in being recognised in their intensive job, when she says: “A woman’s life is hard in its own way, as women have always known and men have rarely understood”. But, according

to Moers, some women had the aptitude to overpass such a negligence coming from men, on adopting the written word as a friend: "Literary women speak for themselves in this matter, as every other, with finality [...] (because) the novel and the poem were women's only instruments of social action in the early nineteenth century: literature was their pulpit, tribune, academy, commission, and parliament all in one" (Moers 3; 20).

Caird, Cobbe, Linton and other women writers used the written word to express feelings, points of view on social and political matters. But, as a consequence, they couldn't escape public opinion, i.e., the condition of being observed. Mary Gillard Husband, for example, is very acute when she tells the readers of *The Journal of Ethics* (vol. 9, n°1) that "it is difficult to review with justice a book like Mrs Caird's" (Husband 132; 131). In this case she was referring to the *Morality of Marriage* (1897), a number of several essays she considers too concentrated in past conventional illustrations of the married women. According to Husband the reputation of many contemporary Victorian women do not, in an epoch of change, seem exactly what Caird describes. Husband thinks there are "a multitude of mentally active married women (...) who are neither slaves nor drudges nor puppets nor dolls [because they] (...) bear an active and weighty part in the formation of the common will and judgement which directs and controls home life, and who take an ever-increasing share in community also (...)". So, her impression towards what Caird advocates is no longer in accordance to the practical life of modern Victorian women because, according to Husband, they can also have independent lives and participate freely in some social/public events. It depends on the free will of each of them. Because of this she thinks Mona Caird's ideal is more theoretical and less a "rational ideal" (Husband 131; 132).

The periodical *Freedom* (October 1888) also refers to the article "Marriage" (1897) as one that besides being "somewhat stained and vague (...) it is written in popular language, it is the utterance of a woman's cry of revolt and it has (...) arrested public attention. The outcry in the daily papers has been the result"³ (2).

In fact, Caird's article didn't leave public opinion indifferent and Eliza Lynn Linton has also accompanied attentively the claims of her feminist opponents in favour of women's emancipation to whom womanly virtues or the power of sacrifice are useless. On stereotyping "the girl of the period" or the "wild woman", Linton was condemning the "modern revolt" of those women who were rebelling themselves against the traditional "natural duties of their sex, and those characteristics known in the mass as womanliness" (Linton in *CIWM* 177). Because on pronouncing such words Linton immediately places herself on the opposite side, one can see that she is again framing the reputation of those wild women, as they were called. And Linton says: "The girl of the period and that girl, of the past, have nothing in common save ancestry and their mother-tongue" (Linton 413). Of course, they

³ See [http://dwardma.pitzer.edu/Anarchist Archives/](http://dwardma.pitzer.edu/Anarchist%20Archives/)

hadn't, certainly. But while Caird is on the side of the girl of the present or the girl of the period and hopes better days will come for them in a nearer future, Linton, on the contrary, waits "patiently until the national madness has passed, and our women have come back again to the old English ideal, once the most beautiful, the most modest, the most essentially womanly in the world" (Linton 417).

Women's reputation and men's reputation have never had a cessation since time immemorial. Indeed, when Eve has offered Adam an apple or when Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) has built a statue of a man thinking in opposition to the Virgin Mary carrying her child in her arms, reputation was immediately placed on the side of Eliza Lynn Linton. However, if you think that Alice Mona Caird has also married, has given birth and besides that has not given up fighting for women's rights, where would Eliza Lynn Linton place this "advanced/new woman"? Would she refer to her as having a dual reputation?

Alice Mona Caird's reputation is, obviously, a paradigm of duality. Because she was an observer, she has immediately transformed herself into a victim of her observance. Like many other feminine writers, she was identified, by some open-minded Victorian people, as a woman of courage on bringing into light the silence of many feminine oppressed voices. However, as a consequence, she was also sanctioned on receiving from her public opponents, during her whole life, their disapproval. In conclusion, we perceived that both supporters and opponents, have always kept their finger in her direction to remind her that big sisters and big brothers "are watching you".

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